

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, welcome to the VA Capitol Health Care Network Podcast Series. I'm Dr. Beth Klingaman, and today I'm welcoming Dr. Neil Weissman and Mr. Thomas Tsuji, who both work at the Baltimore VA doing a novel group treatment for serious mental illness called, Ready, Set, Grow. Neil Weissman is a psychologist and coordinator of the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center at the Baltimore VA and who initiated the development of this group about five years ago. Thomas Tsuji is a psychology intern who has helped run and develop this group for over two years. I, myself, have been helping co-lead and train for this group since it started, and as a psychologist, myself, I've witnessed the benefit and utility of this group. So, I'm really excited to talk with you both more about what you think others can learn from this group and how it might be used in a multitude of different kinds of settings. So, thank you for joining me today.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Glad to be here.

THOMAS TSUJI: Yeah, happy to be here.

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, I'd like to get a little bit more information about you -- actually, about both of you, and I'll start with you, Dr. Weissman. I was wondering if you could share with me a little bit of your background and what's your connection with motivational interviewing?

NEIL WEISSMAN: Well, thanks, Dr. Klingaman, I'd be happy to do so. So, I've been working with the serious mentally ill for almost a quarter of a century or more, and mainly I've been working in -- in recovery-oriented programs. Recovery is a philosophy of collaborative decision making and kind of person-centered therapy, but it lacks a, to my mind, like a clear, kind of, what do you actually do in -- in conversations with the veterans. When I discovered motivational interviewing in a more serious way -- of course, we've all heard about and had workshops or classes, but to really kind of jump in and delve into it, I guess, about seven years ago or so, I realized that it fits hand-in-glove

with the recovery philosophy and really, kind of, can help orchestrate or choreograph a session in a way that is collaborative, is accepting, is recovery-oriented and can lead to real change.

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, I really like how you pulled in what recovery is and why it's so important with serious mental illness, but then also this is -- this is really a mindset, a tool, and something that can be used to help really propel people towards that recovery process.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Both for the veterans and for the clinicians. If we practice in a way -- in my consistent way, we're gonna end up creating a relationship and an atmosphere of person-centered, collaborative, but directive for directional work.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Hmm. What do you mean by "directional work?"

NEIL WEISSMAN: In working in the recovery model and working with MI, we're not posing as experts with kind of prescriptions as to what exactly people should do with their lives. It's not respectful, it's not effective, and it's not the way I would want -- the way I grew up, but rather motivational interviewing, kind of, techniques and philosophy joins to sit side-by-side with the veteran and helps them discover within themselves what's important to them, why is it important to them, and eventually how to get there.

BETH KLINGAMAN: That's a good start to what I wanted to get a little bit more information about from both of you, which is what does motivational interviewing mean to you? If you had to describe it to somebody who may be less familiar with it, what does it mean to you?

THOMAS TSUJI: Umm, for me it means just taking a collaborative approach and focusing in on the person's own motivations for change, and then finding ways to increase that motivation using this style.

NEIL WEISSMAN: I guess to add to that, maybe more poetically for a moment, it would be joining with a person and basically saying, do you want to -- would you hold my hand, and then, okay, where do you want to go, why do you want to go there, why's that important to you, and that discovery, so rich and, so, as Thomas said, so self-motivating, and then finally, okay, let's talk about how we can help you get there.

BETH KLINGAMAN: And the role of the clinician is to not be prescriptive or directional in the sense of I know what's best for you, it's to really partner with that person with genuine curiosity --.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Yeah, it's important, like, I mentioned the word "directional" before versus "directive." So, it's not that we're following the veteran around, kind of the meanderings of a person, but rather we have in our mind the intention of assisting veterans moving towards a particular goal. So, there's a direction, but it's a direction that's kind of come in a collaborative process, as we've mentioned several times, with the client -- between the client and the clinician, as opposed to being prescribed by the clinician.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah, so directional, but not directive -- that's an important distinction.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Yeah. A guide, not a boss.

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, you know -- thank you for that. I appreciate understanding your background and why this matters to you, Dr. Weissman. So, you know, as a psychologist in training, for you, Thomas, Mr. Tsuji -- what's --?

THOMAS TSUJI: You can call me Thomas.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Thomas, okay. So, what's it been like to train in this group during your formative years in learning how to be a psychologist. I mean, you started this how many years ago?

THOMAS TSUJI: About three years ago, I think.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Three years ago? And you're in an extern position here.

THOMAS TSUJI: Uh huh. For me it was a really good opportunity to learn more about motivational interviewing, especially in the group setting, and being able to see how you could be able to use it in a group and to kind of learn about bringing out that motivation in the clients and now having that directive approach, but guiding them toward their own motivation toward change.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah, so learning how to do it, just in general, but then also in a group setting it sounds like was helpful, especially for you.

THOMAS TSUJI: Yeah, because I didn't -- until this group, I didn't have any kind of real thought about how you would do this in a group. I had some ideas, but I didn't have, like, a framework for how to do it.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Why do think it's important to think about doing it in a group versus individually, or kind of being able to be flexible and use it in both scenarios.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Well, we in the PRRC have a lot of groups. There's a certain power to group cohesiveness in Yalom's terms -- a "we're all in this together." And oftentimes it's the experience of being with another colleague or peer has more power and more influence, has a greater impact than on a one-to-one session. So, the question was, how do we create a group that can both be led by practitioners who are focused on MI, or were using MI approaches, and also, more interestingly, is how we create an atmosphere where the veterans, the group participants, themselves, kind of are practicing MI approaches. We thought that if we can get those two things to happen, then that creates, you know, a very rich and fertile environment for change.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Hm. And, what kinds of examples or situations do you see in running the group, Thomas, in your experience, that -- where people have really benefited from that synergy in a group setting, especially if you have people with serious mental illness who might really need more of that social contact and be benefiting from it.

THOMAS TSUJI: Uh huh, yeah, and some of -- some of those are group topics. The one that comes to mind at first is just strengths. So, we have a group on strengths and where we ask our members what their strengths are, and I remember one incidence a group member couldn't come up with their fifth strength, and so the rule had always been if you couldn't come up with your fifth strength, the group would ask -- would -- would help you with it. And I remember distinctly that group member couldn't fill out, you know, I think they could only do two or three, and said that I kind of give up. And then we threw it out to the group, and then immediately the other group members jumped in. And so instead of the, you know, being the group leader offering strengths to the client (the veteran), you know, which still would've made an impact, but hearing that -- when that veteran heard it from the other group members that -- what they saw in her, it really -- she just, like, lit up and she was really excited. And so that feedback from the other members, like Dr. Weissman was mentioning, is really the big key for, you know, I guess the big reason why we do it and we can use it in that group and getting that feedback from other members.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Uh huh. Yeah, I know, speaking in my personal experience, as well, that synergy really helps people recognize what they've actually done and accomplished, and really also the accountability. You know, when you say something to yourself, versus you say something to a group of your peers -- really matters to you what they think and that you track each other. I mean these, you know, people spend so much time together also in the PRC in other groups that, you know, we'll have people coming into the group and saying, you know, "Joe, I -- I know last week you said that you were gonna do this, or that you were thinking about that, and, kind of, where are you now?" with this really genuine interest, which is so fundamental to motivational interviewing.

NEIL WEISSMAN: So, we're drawing from the power that we know that groups have and the benefits of motivational interviewing creating the synergy where people can really develop some momentum towards their growth.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Uh huh. And, we talked about how many groups people can be in. I mean, when they're in a program like this, they have how many groups, would you say, a week?

NEIL WEISSMAN: Twenty-five groups a week.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Twenty-five or so groups -- I mean that's a lot.

NEIL WEISSMAN: That's a lot of groups, yeah, if they come every day and stay for every group.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Right -- yeah. So, what's unique about this group as compared to all the other 24 that they have per week?

NEIL WEISSMAN: Well, aside from your supervising [all laugh] the therapists so effectively --.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Thank you. [laughs]

NEIL WEISSMAN: You're welcome. I think therapists are really paying close attention to using MI -- MI principles and practices and that self-discipline. It makes -- we're hoping, expecting and then seeing it makes a difference. And, as I -- as I mentioned earlier, referenced earlier, we're also encouraging veterans to kind of practice similarly, so rather than just make a suggestion to somebody, they'll first ask permission to make the suggestion. There's an MI intervention called EPE (elicit-provide-elicit), and they don't normally do that necessarily in another group, but they actually -- frankly, I've witnessed in other groups, that they're kind of taking on the habits of this one group, so this one group is actually influencing their participation in the program in general and in other groups in particular. It all emanates from the good habits, so to speak -- the collaborative habits that are being shaped in this Ready, Set, Grow group.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah, wow, that's powerful too, to be able to, kind of, generate a culture within a group of people that then transcends just that 45 minutes per week of, you know, dozens of groups, literally, that they have.

NEIL WEISSMAN: So, it happens in a more, kind of, organized, crystalized way in the Ready, Set, Grow group, but I -- it seems to have impact on their experience in general, so the practitioners are more MI consistent, the group members are more MI consistent, and the material, the content of the group, is MI consistent. So, the group actually uses a lot of the kind of basic off the shelf MI interventions, again, in an MI inspired atmosphere, and, again, drawing on the influence and power of their peers.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Uh huh, and then the types of interactions that you've seen sounds like this elicit-provide-elicited, or at the very least asking for permission before giving feedback to them -- you've seen that show up in other groups?

NEIL WEISSMAN: Yeah, showing up in other groups. I'm running kind of a therapy group where I've seen that. They ask permission first, "would it be okay if I, you know, give you some feedback?" I'm like wow.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Well, now what is the value of that in in MI -- or just in general in growth and motivation? Why does that matter?

THOMAS TSUJI: I think it's very empowering for the clients to have the option to accept or decline someone's feedback, and usually when they accept, you know, after they answer yes, it's okay for, you know, you to give me some feedback, I think they're more ready to listen to it or hear it, rather than if it was unsolicited advice or feedback from somebody else.

NEIL WEISSMAN: True -- that's one example. Other examples are kind of attending more to strengths rather than to, you know, difficulties and members kind of offering affirmations of one another, keeping questions more open ended, rather than yes or no. These are

all things that MI practitioners do -- that's what we do in MI, but you don't necessarily see the cohort doing that, but with this shape being in the reinforcement and the reminders and the guidelines of the Ready, Set, Grow group, it does happen.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Uh huh. So, that's a number of different things that you've seen, kind of, transcend the group that are MI consistent interactions with each other throughout the recovery center here. Thomas, I was wondering if you could say a little bit about what sorts of strategies that you, as a leader in the group, do to facilitate that culture?

THOMAS TSUJI: Uhm, well one of them is we, at the very beginning of each group, we go over, like, group rules, and so as, you know, we mentioned, asking permission before giving feedback is one of the group rules, and our plan throughout the group is if -- and -- and we go over it at the beginning of the group and talk about it, and if we have, you know, if we need reminders on different weeks, we -- we'll highlight why that rule's important, why is it good for you to ask permission for giving feedback or using "I statements" or other group rules that we have, and it gives the group members a chance to kind of discuss it and be reminded so that -- and keep practicing and using those types of just regular rules. Our group -- other things as a group leader you're focusing on -- you focus on change talk and eliciting that from the clients. I think you're always thinking how can I ask a question to evoke more change talk and continue guiding them toward making their change or increasing their desire to change, or their abilities -- confidence in their abilities or reasons or needs.

NEIL WEISSMAN: I think we're -- getting back to the group process part when the environment is one of lots of, like, blaspheming of change talk all over the place, but it also enables each -- like I hear you say that about change, and it evokes in me, oh yeah -- I mean that's a good benefit for me. Maybe that's something I can think about for me, which in an individual session they wouldn't have that opportunity, but when they hear other

people say why -- this is why I want to do this change or whatever, they have the opportunity to reflect on it and say, hey, that may be relevant to me too. And then they -- so you have this exchange -- this exchange of change talk occurring and the owning and trying on and considering which may have been outside of their conscious awareness without their group member saying it.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah, you know, that brings up an interesting point, too, because one of the other ways that this group is unique is that it's not specifically for people who want to focus on a kind of change or a type of growth. These people are coming in with, you know, various -- multiple goals, multiple target behaviors and values that they have that don't necessarily overlap with each other, but what you're saying is that it's not so much about, like, the content of the thing they're trying to work on, it's more of the -- the process that they go through that can be contagious.

NEIL WEISSMAN: It's certainly not only the content. It's more so that, wow, look at him thinking about what's in it for him to make this change. I can do that too. Let me do that too. Let me share -- and what happens in the group -- so they have in the group format there's kind of a large discussion about what the topic of the day would be, and then the group breaks down to smaller groups and dyads where the members are actually eliciting information from one another, evoking, if you will, change talk from each other, and then -- then it's brought back to larger group to discuss as a unit again. So, there's so many different opportunities for this discovery of reasons and how life can be different and better that occur -- group, small group or dyad and large group.

THOMAS TSUJI: We've also seen in the dyads, especially, that we can have group members ask, you know, questions that evoke change talk from each other and be able to do that accurately, and be able to get their partner to talk about all the reasons of why they want to make a change or whatever they're working on, and many times just telling it to

somebody else, they kind of build some more cohesion, and even outside of group, you know, that they might talk to each other or check in with each other and support each other that way too.

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, how do you shape or sculpt people's interactions to being ones that elicit change talk instead of maybe the opposite, of, oh, you're not doing this right, or I know the best way for you to do this, which we know can make people really dig in their heels, understandably, right?

THOMAS TSUJI: Uh huh. So, one way we do that is with the dyads, and even with the group leader we have prescribed questions for them to ask. Whether you're -- the group leader is asking the group members or they're asking each other the specific questions to evoke change talk to stop that chance for anyone to use a righting reflex, or giving advice, or being too directive.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Right. So, the group is structured, and there is an actually clear format which the language of that format is an MI consistent language, and they will go through a, kind of, an arc of change. So the groups will begin maybe with kind of an early identification of maybe strengths and values and then growing to a personal project that they each might have, and then spending some time just sitting in group, maybe two or three weeks of groups in a row, kind of examining the motivational benefits of those groups, such as maybe one week they'll do a roadmap for change group, and the next week they'll do rulers, so they -- the actual format of the group -- there is an actual format of the group and the philosophy of MI with practitioners using MI and the group members encouraged to be consistent with that. And, I think it's important to say that it's an enjoyable group. People really have a very positive feeling about it, so change doesn't feel anxious or anxiety-provoking or kind of intimidating, but actually there's a good feel. There's an upbeat, oh, look, we can do it, and this is why attitude.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah, and that's some feedback that we've gotten in the group is that people have said, you know, compared to other groups I've been to, this one, you know what, we don't spend 20 or 30 minutes talking about everything that's going wrong or things I haven't been able to do, which sometimes drags you down, which there can be a time and a place for, absolutely. But, they say this one is one that helps keep me focused on the future and where I want to be going. One veteran had a metaphor, he said it's like, you know, the energizer bunny, I'm like a windup -- it's like a windup thing. Motivation for me is like that, you know. I might kind of hit an obstacle and working with my recovery coach really helps me with that, but this group is the winding up part that keeps me going. Even -- I'm still marching, even though I might be faced against a wall, and then I can learn to pivot and continue that motivation going forward.

NEIL WEISSMAN: And -- and hopefully that veteran feels that the winding up is accomplished in the group and with the members and with the leaders, but that it's coming from within himself or herself.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Yeah -- yeah. It can be a very powerful experience to --.

NEIL WEISSMAN: Yeah. And, this is generalizable, I mean, we have created a group outline and format and session format that people can use -- other clinicians can use in outpatient clinics, in hospital settings and many different venues.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Uh huh. Yes, we'll actually have a copy of the manual on the website for people to explore that more along with this podcast for more detailed information. So, just to wrap up, you know -- I know we've talked about the general arc of the group and how it goes from more general, you know, exercises where people talk about just where they see the next, you know, chapter of their life going, all the way down to more specific actions that they have decided they do want to take, and giving people support in doing that. But then within each group itself -- I'd say there's about eight sessions, on average,

that people go through to get from that beginning to the end, but then within each group itself there is this process that mirrors the four processes of this --- that we try to do as clinicians. Thomas, can you say a little bit about that and then we'll --.

THOMAS TSUJI: Uh huh. Yeah, so the organization of the group -- each group is set up to follow the four processes of motivational interviewing, so engage, focus, evoke and plan. So, engagement -- we start with group rules, asking about what the group is about. Focus -- we focus in on our specific topic for this session, whether it be importance rulers, confidence rulers, roadmap to change, smart goals, et cetera, and then the evoking part where we have the prescribed questions that group leaders or group members can ask each other about to elicit more change talk, and then planning, we have asking what's the next step or what's -- what are they gonna do in the next week to move toward their goal.

NEIL WEISSMAN: So on the meta level, there is the arc of moving from thinking about change to actually groups on planning change, and then in each group there's the four processes occurring in the group, so it's the meta four processes and the micro four processes and a good feeling -- good feeling in the group.

BETH KLINGAMAN: So, thank you both for giving us an update and a summary of what -- what's been going on with this group, and is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you think is important for people to know as they learn more about what this might be able to offer in various other, like, types of setting?

THOMAS TSUJI: I think it -- it can be applied anywhere. I think these groups, you know, are very generalizable. You can reach a lot of different populations and, you know, I think a lot of people can benefit from it.

NEIL WEISSMAN: And what I would say is that if you're learning to do this group you're gonna -- as a clinician, you're gonna develop good therapy skills, and you'll have the benefit of

experiencing and witnessing successes for individuals in the group, and the success of having a group that's enjoyable to be part of.

BETH KLINGAMAN: Great. Well, thank you so much, again, for your time and maybe we'll check back in, in a little bit, and see, you know, if there's any new modifications or ways that you've improved the group, any new innovations in a -- maybe a year or two, see what's going on. So, thanks again!

THOMAS TSUJI: Thank you.

NEIL WEISSMAN: You're welcome, and of course you can get, for \$12.99 [laughs], formatted group at a discount rate [all laughing]. Just call up 1-800-BETH-KLINGAMAN.

BETH KLINGAMAN: [laughing] Anytime -- even [inaudible-00:29:12] [all laughing] Thank you all.